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RHEHAAA/NATIONAL SECURITY COUNCIL WASHINGTON DC IMMEDIATE
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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 TAIPEI 001042

SIPDIS

STATE ALSO FOR S/EC-O/CMS, AND EAP/TC, BANGKOK FOR
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TAGS: PREL PINR AEMR PGOV XE TW

SUBJECT: PRESIDENT MA STRUGGLES TO RECOVER POLITICAL
FOOTING AFTER TYPHOON DEBACLE

REF: A. TAIPEI 996
 1B. TAIPEI 1004
 1C. TAIPEI 1005
 1D. TAIPEI 1011

Classified By: Acting Director Robert Wang for reasons 1.4 (b/d)

11. (C) Summary: President Ma Ying-jeou is working full time to regain his political footing after widespread criticism he reacted far too slowly to Typhoon Morakot. With opinion polls showing a precipitous decline in his popularity, Ma went to the worst-hit villages to console victims, apologize for his administration's tardy response and promise speedy reconstruction. He also announced his intent to reshuffle his Cabinet to get rid of ministers who bungled the typhoon response. Local elections in December will be a key test of how he tackles reconstruction, and growing public fears about the swine flu outbreak. Taiwan analysts expect Beijing will want to help shore up Ma, even if only by offering reconstruction assistance and postponing more sensitive cross-Strait initiatives until Ma's image improves. End Summary.

MA EMPLOYS FULL-COURT DAMAGE CONTROL

2. (SBU) Ma has paid a steep political price for his government's perceived failure to respond aggressively to the August 8 typhoon and for taking too long to visit the worst-hit villages that were buried by mudslides. His approval rating tumbled into the teens, and newspapers reported some ruling party candidates in upcoming local elections quietly removed from their campaigns any photos of them posing with the president. When Ma finally toured the hardest-hit villages on August 19, television news repeatedly ran clips of the grim-faced president bowing low and long before irate villagers in abject apology, and acknowledging he arrived late. At times he appeared awkward and stiff as he consoled grieving victims with hugs and, in one case, offered his handkerchief to an elderly woman gushing tears.

13. (C) As part of a multi-pronged damage control program, Ma promised speedy reconstruction to the typhoon victims and a Cabinet reshuffle to get rid of ministers who botched the disaster relief. Political analysts expect perhaps a half-dozen top officials will get the ax. Resignations tendered by Defense Minister Chen Chao-min, Deputy Foreign Minister Andrew Hsia and Executive Yuan Secretary-General

Hsueh Hsiang-chuan are expected to be accepted. News media also reported Foreign Minister Francisco Ou offered to resign to take responsibility for the government's initial refusal of foreign aid. Other possible casualties include the transportation and communication minister and the head of the Water Resources Agency. Although Premier Liu Chao-shiuan's post-typhoon approval ratings were even lower than Ma's, most analysts expected he would survive the reshuffle.

SOME SIGNS OF HOPE FOR MA, BUT CHALLENGES REMAIN

¶14. (SBU) A few signs that Ma may have stabilized his political free-fall have emerged in recent days. His approval rating crept up to 20 percent from 16 percent in one widely cited public opinion survey. Typhoon victims also appeared to be at least somewhat placated by Ma's visit, according to Yeh-Diing Wang, a leading pollster who had just returned from the disaster area when he spoke to PolOff on 8/25. Meanwhile, a few local politicians from the opposition Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) also have received negative publicity. For example, typhoon victims accused the magistrate of Pingdong County of withholding desperately needed relief funds. Media also covered a county councilman who pummeled a typhoon victim for cursing at the magistrate during a visit to the disaster area. And in two weeks, former President Chen Shui-bian of the DPP will be sentenced in his corruption trial, which also should steer the media focus from Ma's typhoon relief performance.

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¶15. (C) Another pollster, Global Views Survey Research Director Li-An Tai, argued that the political damage to Ma would be lasting. His post-typhoon polling found a significant drop in public trust for Ma; only 37% percent of respondents said they trusted the president while 47% said they didn't. Tai said Ma would have a tough slog raising his public trust levels, which generally tend to fluctuate much less than approval ratings. Political analysts also note that Ma will face several difficult leadership tests in the coming weeks, including disaster reconstruction and a sudden jump in the number of swine flu cases. Any missteps in those areas likely will strengthen post-typhoon public perceptions of incompetence.

¶16. (C) The first post-typhoon electoral test will come in late September with a legislative by-election in central Taiwan, which had been viewed as a toss-up between candidates from Ma's Kuomintang (KMT) and the DPP. The opposition party now believes it may have an edge thanks to anger over typhoon relief, and a victory might in turn improve DPP chances in local elections in December. DPP Central Executive Committee Member Luo Wen-Jia acknowledged that the bungled typhoon relief presented an opportunity for the opposition in December but he cautioned that his party shouldn't get its hopes up too much. County and city elections typically turn on local personalities and issues, and in any event the DPP has yet to greatly benefit from Ma's missteps because of its own internal disarray.

MA'S POLITICAL FUTURE AND CROSS-STRAIT TIES

¶17. (C) Political analysts agree that no one wants to see Ma recover more than China's leaders, who have found in the president an eager partner in improving cross-Strait ties. Pollster Dai believes China will try to support Ma by offering reconstruction aid and promoting civilian exchanges. Others note Ma's aggressive cross-Strait policies made many voters uneasy and he may have to be more cautious, at least for now, given his eroded public trust. Luo and Antonio Chiang, a popular columnist and former senior official in the Chen administration, said Ma may have to delay signing an

Economic Cooperation Framework Agreement (ECFA) with China originally targeted for completion by year's end. Luo argued that the southern Taiwan fishermen and laborers who bore the brunt of the typhoon's fury would be among those whose livelihoods would be threatened by an agreement. Pollster Dai said he thought a framework agreement still could be concluded this year. He said the accord was important to Taiwan to counter China's trade agreement with ASEAN that takes effect in January. (Note: In any case, we understand the ECFA is not likely to include agricultural or labor imports from the mainland at this time. End note.)

COMMENT: LIMITS ON CROSS-STRAIT TIES

18. (C) For all the progress made with China under Ma, the typhoon relief clearly illustrates the limitations on the cross-Strait relationship. While Taiwan gratefully accepted heavy-lift U.S. military helicopters to ferry earth-moving equipment to remote villages inundated by mudslides, it rejected China's offer of a similar helicopter. Although the Chinese helicopter purportedly was from a private enterprise, most here assumed it would have been controlled by the Chinese military, an unacceptable prospect for a people who remain deeply wary of Beijing's reunification goal. Taiwan did, however, accept 1,000 pre-fabricated homes for typhoon victims and a handful of technicians to help put them together, although tests were conducted after some residents complained that the shelters had unacceptably high levels of formaldehyde.

COMMENT CONTINUED: A HUGE STUMBLE FOR MA, BUT A CHANCE TO RECOVER

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19. (C) Until Typhoon Morakot swept through southern Taiwan, no one seriously doubted that President Ma would handily win reelection in 2012. While he still is seen as the favorite to receive the KMT nomination, especially as he will assume chairmanship of the party in October, the otherwise hapless opposition may now have an opening to mount a credible challenge. Whether the DPP can make it a close contest will depend on Ma's ability to rehabilitate his tattered image, and much will depend on how well he does in the coming weeks. Typhoon reconstruction, swine flu and cross-Strait relations all will provide opportunities for Ma to either regain his political footing or to cement the growing perception he is an ineffectual and unfeeling leader.

WANG